

A close-up, slightly blurred background image of a baseball, showing the white leather and red stitching. The text is overlaid on this image.

STEPHEN KING

A FACE IN
THE CROWD

STEWART
O'NAN

The writing team that delivered the bestselling *Faithful*, about the 2004 Red Sox championship season, takes readers to the ballpark again, and to a world beyond, in an eBook original to be published on August 21, 2012.

Dean Evers, an elderly widower, sits in front of the television with nothing better to do than waste his leftover evenings watching baseball. It's Rays/Mariners, and David Price is breezing through the line-up. Suddenly, in a seat a few rows up beyond the batter, Evers sees the face of someone from decades past, someone who shouldn't be at the ballgame, shouldn't be on the planet. And so begins a parade of people from Evers's past, all of them occupying that seat behind home plate. Until one day Dean Evers sees someone even eerier...

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Stephen King and Stewart O’Nan

A FACE IN THE CROWD

The summer after his wife died, Dean Evers started watching a lot of baseball. Like so many snowbirds from New England, he was a Red Sox fan who’d fled the nor’easters for the Gulf Coast of Florida and magnanimously adopted the Devil Rays, then perennial punching bags, as his second team. While he’d coached Little League, he’d never been a big fan—never obsessed, the way his son Pat was—but, night after night, as the gaudy sunset colored the West, he found himself turning on the Rays game to fill his empty condo.

He knew it was just a way of passing time. He and Ellie had been married forty-six years, through the good and the bad, and now he had no one who remembered any of it. She was the one who’d lobbied him to move to St. Pete, and then, not five years after they packed up the house, she had her stroke. The terrible thing was that she was in great shape. They’d just played a bracing set of tennis at the club. She’d beat him again, meaning he bought the drinks. They were sitting under an umbrella, sipping chilled gin-and-tonics, when she winced and pressed a hand over one eye.

“Brain freeze?” he asked.

She didn’t move, sat there stuck, her other eye fixed, staring far beyond him.

“El,” he said, reaching to touch her bare shoulder. Later, though the doctor said it was impossible, he would remember her skin being cold.

She folded face first onto the table, scattering their glasses, bringing the waiters and the manager and the lifeguard from the pool, who gently laid her head on a folded towel and knelt beside her, monitoring her pulse until the EMTs arrived. She lost everything on her right side, but she was alive, that was what mattered, except, quickly, not a month after she finished her PT and came home from the rehab, she had a second, fatal stroke while he was giving her a shower, a scene which replayed in his mind so often that he decided he had to move to a new place, which brought him here, to a bayside high-rise where he knew no one, and anything that helped pass the time was welcome.

He ate while he watched the game. He made his own dinner now, having tired of eating alone in restaurants and ordering expensive takeout. He was still learning the basics. He could make pasta and grill a steak, cut up a red pepper to crown a bag salad. He had no finesse, and too often was discouraged at the results, taking little pleasure in them. Tonight was a pre seasoned pork chop he’d picked

up at the Publix. Just stick it in a hot pan and go, except he could never tell when meat was done. He got the chop crackling, threw a salad together, and set a place at the coffee table, facing the TV. The fat at the bottom of the pan was beginning to char. He poked the meat with a finger, testing for squishiness, but couldn't be sure. He took a knife and cut into it, revealing a pocket of blood. The pan was going to be hell to clean.

And then, when he finally sat down and took his first bite, the chop was tough. "Terrible," he heckled himself. "Chef Ramsay you ain't."

The Rays were playing the Mariners, meaning the stands were empty. When the Sox or Yanks were in town, the Trop was packed, otherwise the place was deserted. In the bad old days it made sense, but now the club was a serious contender. As David Price breezed through the lineup, Evers noted with dismay several fans in the padded captain's chairs behind the plate talking on their cell phones. Inevitably, one teenager began waving like a castaway, presumably to the person on the other end, watching at home.

"Look at me," Evers said. "I'm on TV, therefore I exist."

The kid waved for several pitches. He was right over the umpire's shoulder, and when Price dropped in a backdoor curve, the replay zoomed on the Met Life strike zone, magnifying the kid's idiotic grin as he waved in slow motion. Two rows behind him, sitting alone in his white sanitary smock with his thin, pomaded hair slicked back, solid and stoic as a tiki god, was Evers's old dentist from Shrewsbury, Dr. Young.

Young Dr. Young, his mother had called him, because even when Evers was a child, he'd been old. He'd been a Marine in the Pacific, had come back from Tarawa missing part of a leg and all of his hope. He'd spent the rest of his life exacting his revenge not on the Japanese but on the children of Shrewsbury, finding soft spots in their enamel with the pitiless point of his stainless steel hook and plunging needles into their gums.

Evers stopped chewing and leaned forward to be sure. The greased-back hair and Mount Rushmore forehead, the Coke-bottle bifocals and thin lips that went white when he bore down with the drill—yes, it was him, and not a day older than when Evers had last seen him, over fifty years ago.

It couldn't be. He'd be at least ninety. But the humidior that was Florida was full of men his age, many of them well preserved, near mummified beneath their guayaberas and tans.

No, Evers thought, he'd smoked. It was another thing Evers hated about him, the stale reek of his breath and his clothes as he loomed in close over him, trying to get leverage. The red pack fit the pocket of

his smock—Lucky Strikes, filterless, the true coffin nails. *L.S.M.F.T.*, that was the old slogan: *Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco*. Perhaps it was a younger brother, or a son. Even Younger Dr. Young.

Price blew a fastball by the batter to end the inning and a commercial intervened, hauling Evers back to the present. His pork chop was tough as a catcher's mitt. He tossed it in the trash and grabbed a beer. The first cold gulp sobered him. There was no way that was his Dr. Young, with his shaky morning-after hands and more than a hint of gin under his cigarette breath. Nowadays they'd call his condition PTSD, but to a kid at the mercy of his instruments, it didn't matter. Evers had despised him, had surely at some point wished him, if not dead, then gone.

When the Rays came to bat, the teenager was waving again, but the rows behind him were vacant. Evers kept an eye out, expecting Dr. Young to come back with a beer and a hot dog, yet as the innings passed and Price's strikeouts mounted, the seat remained empty. Nearby, a woman in a sparkly top was now waving to the folks at home.

He wished Ellie were there to tell, or that he could call his mother and ask whatever happened to Young Dr. Young, but, as with so much of his daily existence, there was no one to share it with. More likely than not, the man was just another old guy with nothing better to do than waste his leftover evenings watching baseball, only at the park instead of at home.

Late that night, around three, Evers could easily see why of all the possible punishments prisoners feared solitary confinement the most. At some point a beating had to stop, but a thought could go on and on, feeding and then feeding on insomnia. Why Dr. Young, who he hadn't thought of in years? Was it a sign? An omen? Or was he—as he feared he might when they told him Ellie had died—gradually losing his grip on this world?

To prove those doubts wrong, he spent the next day running errands around town, chatting with the clerk at the post office, and the woman at the circulation desk of the library—just small talk, but still, a connection, something to build on. Like every summer, Pat and his family had taken off for the Cape and Sue's folks' place. Evers called their machine anyway and left a message. When they came back they should really get together. He'd love to take them all out to dinner somewhere, their choice, or maybe a ballgame.

That evening he prepared his dinner as if nothing had happened, though now he was very aware of the time, and ended up rushing his grilled chicken so he could catch the first pitch. The Rays were playing the Mariners again, and again attendance was sparse, the upper deck a sea of blue. Evers settled in to watch, ignoring where the

pitch was, focusing instead on the third row just to the left of the umpire. As if to answer his question with a cosmic Bronx cheer, Raymond, the team's mascot, a creature with blue fur not found anywhere in the natural world, flopped across the seats, shaking his fist behind Ichiro's back.

"You're going shack whacky," Evers said. "That's all."

The Mariners' ace, Felix Hernandez, was going for them, and King Felix was on. The game was fast. By the time Evers cracked his nightly beer, it was the sixth and the M's were up by a couple. It was then, just as King Felix caught Ben Zobrist looking, that Evers saw, three rows deep, in the same pinstripe suit he was buried in, his old business partner Leonard Wheeler.

Leonard Wheeler—always Leonard, never Lennie—was eating a hot dog and washing it down with what ESPN's *Sports Center* smartasses were pleased to call "an adult beverage." For a moment, too startled for denial, Evers defaulted to the outrage the merest thought of Wheeler could call up from his gut even now. "You controlling son of a bitch!" he shouted, and dropped his own adult beverage, which he'd just been bringing to his lips. The can fell into the tray balanced on his lap and knocked it to the floor between his feet, where the chicken, instant mashed potatoes, and Birds Eye string beans (also of a color not found in the natural world) lay on the carpet in a foaming puddle of beer.

Evers didn't notice, only stared at his new television, which was so state-of-the-art that he sometimes felt he could simply hoick up a leg, duck his head to keep from bumping the frame, and step right into the picture. It was Wheeler, all right: same gold-rimmed glasses, same jutting jaw and weirdly plump lips, same head of flamboyant snow-white hair that made him look like a soap opera star—the mature lead who plays either a saintly doctor or a tycoon cuckolded by his sleazy trophy wife. There was no mistaking the oversize flag pin in his lapel either. He'd always worn that damned thing like a jackleg congressman. Ellie once joked that Lennie (when it was just them, they always called him that) probably tucked it under his pillow before he went to sleep.

Then the denial rushed in, swarming over his initial shock the way white blood cells swarm into a fresh cut. Evers closed his eyes, counted to five, then popped them wide, sure he'd see someone who just looked like Wheeler, or—perhaps worse—no one at all.

The shot had changed. Instead of a new batter stepping in, the camera focused on the Mariners' left fielder, who was doing a peculiar little dance.

"Never seen *that* one before," one of the Rays' announcers said. "What the heck is Wells up to, Dewayne?"

“Li’l crunk move, I ’spec,” Dewayne Staats vamped, and they both chuckled.

Enough with the sparkling repartee, Evers thought. He shuffled his feet and managed to step on his beer-soaked chicken breast. *Go back to the damn home plate shot*.

As if the producer in his gadget-loaded broadcast truck had heard him, the shot switched back, but only for a second. Luke Scott hit a bullet to the Mariners’ second baseman, and in the wink of an eye, the Trop was gone and Evers was left with the Aflac duck, who was plugging holes in a rowboat even as it plugged insurance.

Evers got halfway up before his knees gave way and he collapsed back into his chair. The cushion made a tired wooshing sound. He took a deep breath, let it out, and felt a little stronger. This time he made it to his feet and trundled into the kitchen. He got the carpet cleaner from under the sink and read the instructions. Ellie wouldn’t have needed to read them. Ellie would have simply made some half-irritated, half-amused comment (“You can dress him up, but you can’t take him out” was a favorite) and gone to work making the mess disappear.

“That was not Lennie Wheeler,” he told the empty living room as he came back. “No way it was.”

The duck was gone, replaced by a man and his wife smooching on a patio. Soon they would go upstairs and make Viagra-aided love, because this was the age of knowing how to get things done. Evers, who also knew how to get things done (he’d read the instructions on the can, after all), fell on his knees, returned his sopping dinner to the tray in a series of plops, then sprayed a small cloud of Resolve on the remaining crud, knowing there’d probably be a stain anyway.

“Lennie Wheeler is as dead as Jacob Marley. I went to his funeral.”

Indeed he had, and although his face had remained appropriately grave and regretful throughout, he’d enjoyed it. Laughter might be the best medicine, but Dean Evers believed outliving your enemies was the best revenge.

Evers and Wheeler had met in business school, and had started Speedy Truck Rental on a shoestring after Wheeler had found what he called “a gaping hole the size of the Sumner Tunnel” in the New England market. In those early days Evers hadn’t minded Wheeler’s overbearing manner, perfectly summed up by a plaque on the man’s office wall: WHEN I WANT MY OPINION, I’LL ASK YOU FOR IT. In those days, before Evers had begun to find his own way, he’d needed that kind of attitude. Wheeler, he sometimes thought, had been the steel in his spine. But young men grow up and develop their own ideas.

After twenty years Speedy had become the biggest independent truck rental outfit in New England, one of the few untainted by either organized crime or IRS problems. That was when Leonard Wheeler—never Lennie except when Evers and his wife were safely tucked into bed and giggling like a couple of kids—decided it was time to go national. Evers finally stood up on his hind legs and demurred. Not gently, as in previous disagreements, but firmly. Loudly, even. Everyone in the office had heard them, he had no doubt, even with the door closed.

The game came back on while he was waiting for the Resolve to set. Hellickson was still dealing for the Rays, and he was sharp. Not as sharp as Hernandez, though, and on any other night Evers would have been sending him brain-wave encouragement. Not tonight. Tonight he sat back on his heels at the base of his chair with his bony knees on either side of the stain he was trying to clean up, peering at the stands behind home plate.

There was Wheeler, still right there, now drinking a beer with one hand and holding a cell phone in the other. Just the sight of the phone filled Evers with outrage. Not because cell phones should be outlawed in ballparks like smoking, but because Wheeler had died of a heart attack long before such things were in general use. He had no *right* to it!

“Oh-oh, that’s a *loo-oong* drive!” Dewayne Staats was bellowing. “Justin Smoak smoked *aaa-alll* of that one!”

The camera followed the ball into the nearly deserted stands, and lingered to watch two boys fighting over it. One emerged victorious and waved it at the camera, pumping his hips in a singularly obscene manner as he did so.

“Fuck you!” Evers shouted. “You’re on TV, so what?”

He hardly ever used such language, but had he not said that very same thing to his partner during the argument over the expansion? Yes. Nor had it just been *Fuck you*. It had been *Fuck you, Lennie*.

“And what I did, you deserved it.” He was dismayed to discover he was on the verge of tears. “You wouldn’t take your foot off my neck, Leonard. I did what I had to do.”

Now the camera returned to where it belonged, which was showing Smoak doing his home run trot, and pointing at the sky—well, *dome*—as he crossed home plate to the apathetic applause of the two dozen or so Mariner fans in attendance.

Kyle Seager stood in. Behind him, in the third row, the seat where Wheeler had been was empty.

It wasn’t him, Evers thought, scrubbing the stain (that barbecue sauce was simply not going to come up). *It was just someone who looked like him*.

That hadn't worked very well with Young Doctor Young, and it didn't work at all now.

Evers turned off the TV and decided he'd go to bed early.

Useless. Sleep didn't come at ten or at midnight. At two o'clock he took one of Ellie's Ambiens, hoping it wouldn't kill him—it was eighteen months past the expiration date. It didn't, but it didn't put him to sleep either. He took another half a tablet and lay in bed thinking of a plaque he'd kept in his own office. It said GIVE ME A LEVER LONG ENOUGH, A FULCRUM STRONG ENOUGH, AND I'LL MOVE THE WORLD. Far less arrogant than Wheeler's plaque, but perhaps more useful.

When Wheeler refused to let him out of the partnership agreement Evers had foolishly signed when he'd been young and humble, he'd needed that kind of lever to shift his partner. As it so happened, he had one. Leonard Wheeler had a taste for the occasional young boy. Oh, not *young* young, not jailbait, but college age. Wheeler's personal assistant, Martha, had confided to Evers one rum-soaked night at a convention in Denver that Wheeler was partial to the lifeguard type. Later, sober and remorseful, she'd begged him never to say a word to anyone. Wheeler was a good boss, she said, hard but good, and his wife was a dream. The same was true of his son and daughter.

Evers kept mum, even keeping this nugget from Ellie. If she'd known he intended to use any such scurrilous information to break the partnership agreement, she would have been horrified. *It's surely not necessary to stoop to that*, she would have said, and she would have believed it. El thought she understood the bind he was in, but she didn't. The most important thing she didn't understand was that it was *their* bind—hers and little Patrick's as well as his own. If Speedy went nationwide now, they'd be crushed by the giants within a year. Two at the outside. Evers was dead certain of it, and had the numbers to back it up. All they'd worked for would be washed away, and he had no intention of drowning in the sea of Lennie Wheeler's ambitions. It could not be allowed.

He hadn't opened with *Fuck you, Lennie*. First he tried the reasonable approach, using the latest spreadsheets to lay out his case. Their market share in New England was due to their ability to rent one-way and at hourly rates the big boys couldn't match. Because the area they covered was so compact, they could rebalance their entire inventory within three hours, where the big boys couldn't and had to charge a premium. On September 1, move-in day for the students, Speedy owned Boston. Spread the fleet thin trying to cover the Lower 48 and they'd have the same headaches as U-Haul and Penske—the same lumbering business model they purposely avoided and

undersold. Why would they want to be like the other guys when they were killing the other guys? If Wheeler hadn't noticed, Penske was in Chapter 11, Thrifty too.

"Precisely," Wheeler said. "With the big boys on the sidelines, this is the perfect time. We *don't* try to be like them, Dean. We chop the country into regions and do what we already do."

"How does that work in the Northwest?" Evers asked. "Or the Southwest? Or even the Midwest? The country's too big."

"It may not be as profitable at first, but it won't take long. You've seen our competition. Eighteen months—two years tops—and we'll be absolutely killing them."

"We're already overextended, and now you want us to take on more debt."

As they went back and forth, Evers honestly believed in his argument. Even for a publicly owned company, the problems of capitalization and cash flow were insurmountable—a judgment that would prove devastatingly true two decades later, when the downturn hit. But Lennie Wheeler was used to having his way, and nothing Evers said would dissuade him. Wheeler had already talked with several venture capital concerns and printed up a sleek-looking brochure. He planned to take his proposal directly to the shareholders, over Evers's protests, if necessary.

"I don't think you want to do that," Evers said.

"And why's that, Dean?"

He'd tried, really tried, to do this ethically, honorably. And he knew he was right; time would prove it. In business everything was a means to one end—survival. Evers felt it urgently then and still thought it true today: He had to save the company. Hence, the nuclear option.

"I don't think you want to do that because I don't think you'd like what I'd take to the shareholders' meeting. Or should I say, whom."

Wheeler laughed, a sick little chuckle. He stared at Evers as if he'd pulled a gun. "Whom?"

"We both know whom," Evers said.

Wheeler slowly rubbed a hand up the side of his face. "I was wondering why you walked in here like you'd already won something."

"We're not winning anything. We're avoiding a mistake that would lose us everything. I'm sorry it came to this. If you'd have just listened to me—"

"Fuck you, Dean," Wheeler said. "Don't try to apologize for blackmail. It's bad manners. And since it's just the two of us, why don't you roll those spreadsheets tight—that's the only way you'll get them up that narrow ass of yours—and admit the truth: you're a

coward. Always were.”

Within a year, Evers bought him out. The split was expensive, and, in retrospect, a better deal than Wheeler deserved. Lennie left New England, then his wife, and finally, in an ER in Palm Springs, this earthly vale of tears. Out of respect, Evers flew west for the funeral, at which, not surprisingly, there were no lifeguard types, and, of the family, only the daughter, who dryly thanked Evers for coming. He didn’t say the first thought that had come into his mind: *Sarcasm doesn’t become fat girls, dear*. A few years later, after a thorough vetting of the numbers and fueled by Bain Capital, Speedy actually did go national, using a streamlined version of their old regional plan. That Evers had been right—that it ended with Speedy’s lawyers filing the same Chapter 11 briefs as their vanquished rivals—was little vindication. He came out of it with a goodly sum, however, and that was.

The funny thing was that with a minimum of digging—an offhand question or three to Martha, a keen read of her blinking—Wheeler could have bought himself an ironclad insurance policy. When Evers realized this, he gently dropped her, which, because they both had a conscience, was actually a relief. Their fling had run its more than pleasant course, and rather than fire her, he kept her closer, making her his executive assistant at double the salary, working beside her day in, day out until, eventually, she accepted a lavish early retirement package. At her farewell party, he made a speech and gave her a Honda Gold Wing and a peck on the cheek, to raised glasses and warm applause. The affair ended with a slide show featuring Martha on her old Harley Tri-Glide, while George Thorogood sang “Ride On Josephine.”

It was a rare moment for Evers, a happy parting. Beyond the silly intrigue, he’d always liked Martha, her brash laugh and the way she hummed to herself as she typed, a pencil tucked behind one ear. What he said in his speech—that she wasn’t merely an assistant but a dear and trusted friend—was true. Though he hadn’t spoken to her in ages, of all the people he’d worked with, she was the only one he missed. Drowsing now as the Ambien kicked in, he wondered hazily if she was still alive, or if, tomorrow, he’d turn on the game and find her behind home, wearing the sleeveless yellow sundress with the daisies he liked.

He rose at eight—a full hour past his usual time—and stooped to pick the paper from the mat. He checked the sports page and discovered the Rays had the night off. That was all right; there was always *CSI*. Evers showered, ate a healthy breakfast in which wheat germ played a major role, then sat down to track Young Doctor Young on the computer. When that marvel of the twenty-first century failed

(or maybe he just wasn't doing it right; Ellie had always been the computer whiz), he picked up the telephone. According to the morgue desk at the Shrewsbury *Herald-Crier*, the dental bogeyman of Evers's childhood had died in 1978. Amazingly, he'd been only fifty-nine, nearly a decade younger than Evers was now. Evers pondered the unknowable: was his life cut short by the war, Luckies, dentistry, or all three?

There was nothing remarkable in his obituary, just the usual survived by and funeral home info. Evers had had absolutely nothing to do with the drunk old butcher's demise, just the bad luck to be his victim. Exonerated, that night he raised an extra glass or four to Dr. Young. He ordered in, but it took forever, arriving after he was well in the bag. *CSI* turned out to be one he'd seen before, and all the sitcoms were stupid. Where was Bob Newhart when you needed him? Evers brushed his teeth, took two of Ellie's Ambiens, then stood swaying in front of the bathroom mirror, his eyes bleeding. "Give me a liver long enough," he said, "and I'll move the fucking world."

He slept late again, recovering with instant coffee and oatmeal, and was pleased to see in the paper that the Sox were coming in for a big weekend series. He celebrated the opener with steak, setting the DVR to capture whatever malevolent spirit his past might vomit up. If it happened, this time he'd be ready.

It did, in the seventh inning of a tie game, on a key play at the plate. He would have missed it if he'd gone off to do the dishes, but by then he was poised on the edge of the sofa, totally into the contest and concentrating on every pitch. Longoria doubled to the gap in left center, and Upton tried to score from first. The throw beat him but was wide, up the first baseline. As Sox catcher Kelly Shoppach lunged toward home with a sweep tag, directly behind the screen a scrawny, freckle-faced boy not more than nine rose from his seat.

His haircut was what used to be called a Dutch boy, or, if you were taunting this particular fellow at school, a soup bowl. "Hey, Soup!" they used to hound him in gym, pummeling him, turning every game into Smear the Queer. "Hey, Soupy, Soup, Soupy!"

His name was Lester Embree, and here in the shadowy Trop he wore the same threadbare red-and-blue striped shirt and bleached, patched-at-the-knees Tuffskins he always seemed to have on that spring of 1954. He was white but he lived in the black part of town behind the fairgrounds. He had no father, and the kindest rumor about his mother said she worked in the laundry at St. Joe's hospital. In the middle of the school year he'd come to Shrewsbury from some hick town in Tennessee, a move that seemed foolish, a dunderheaded affront to Evers and his cadre of buddies. They delighted in imitating his soft drawl, drawing out the halting answers he gave in class into

Foghorn Leghorn monologues. “I say, I say, Miss Pritchett, ma’am, I do declayuh I have done done dooty in these heah britches.”

On-screen, Upton leapt to his feet, looking back at the sprawled catcher and signaling safe just as the umpire punched the air with a clenched fist. A different camera zoomed out to show Joe Maddon charging from the dugout in high dudgeon. The sellout crowd was going wild.

In the replay—even before Evers paused and ran it back with the clicker—Lester Embree and his doofy bowl cut were visible above the FOX 13 ad recessed into the wall’s blue padding, and then, as Upton clearly evaded the tag with a nifty hook slide, the quiet boy Evers and his friends had witnessed being pulled wrinkled and fingerless from Marsden’s Pond rose and pointed one fish-nibbled stub not at the play developing right in front of him, but, as if he could see into the air-conditioned, dimly lit condo, directly at Evers. His lips were moving, and it didn’t look like he was saying *Kill the ump*.

“Come on,” Evers scoffed, as if at the bad call. “Jesus, I was a kid.”

The TV returned to live action—very lively, in fact. Joe Maddon and the home plate ump stood toe to toe and nose to nose. Both were jawing away, and you didn’t have to be a fortune-teller to know that Maddon would soon be following the game from the clubhouse. Evers had no interest in watching the Rays’ manager get the hook. He used his remote to run the picture back to where Lester Embree had come into view.

Maybe he won’t be there, Evers thought. *Maybe you can’t DVR ghosts any more than you can see vampires in a mirror*.

Only Lester Embree was right there in the stands—in the expensive seats, no less—and Evers suddenly remembered the day at Fairlawn Grammar when old Soupy had been waiting at Evers’s locker. Just seeing him there had made Evers want to haul off and paste him one. The little fucker was trespassing, after all. *They’ll stop if you tell ’em to*, Soupy had said in that crackerbarrel drawl of his. *Even Kaz will stop*.

He’d been talking about Chuckie Kazmierski, only no one called him Chuckie, not even now. Evers could attest to that, because Kaz was the only friend from his childhood who was still a friend. He lived in Punta Gorda, and sometimes they got together for a round of golf. Just two happy retirees, one divorced, one a widower. They reminisced a lot—really, what else were old men good for?—but it had been years since they talked about Soupy Embree. Evers had to wonder now just why that was. Shame? Guilt? Maybe on his part, but probably not on Kaz’s. As the youngest of six brothers and the runt of their scruffy pack, Kaz had had to fight for every inch of respect. He’d

earned his spot as top dog the hard way, with knuckles and blood, and he took Lester Embree's helplessness as a personal insult. No one had ever given him a break, and now this whingeing hillbilly was asking for a free pass? "Nothing's free," Kaz used to say, shaking his head as if it was a sad truth. "Somehow, some way, somebody got to pay."

Probably Kaz doesn't even remember, Evers thought. *Neither did I, till tonight.* Tonight he was having total recall. Mostly what he remembered was the kid's pleading eyes that day by his locker. Big and blue and soft. And that wheedling, cornpone voice, begging him, like it was really in his power to do it.

You're the one Kaz and the rest of them listen to. Gimme a break, won't you? Ah'll give you money. Two bucks a week, that's mah whole allowance. All Ah want's to get along.

Little as he liked to, Evers could remember his answer, delivered in a jeering mockery of the boy's accent: *If'n all you want's to git along, you git along raht out of heah, Soupy. Ah don't want yoah money, hit's prob'ly crawlin wit' fag germs.*

A loyal lieutenant (not the general, as Lester Embree had assumed), Evers immediately brought the matter to Kaz, embellishing the scene further, laughing at his own drawl. Later, in the shadow of the flagpole, he egged Kaz on from the nervous circle surrounding the fight. Technically, it wasn't a fight at all, because Soupy never defended himself. He folded at Kaz's first blow, curling into a ball on the ground while Kaz slugged and kicked him at will. And then, as if he'd tired, Kaz straddled him, grabbed his wrists, and pinned his arms back above his head. Soupy was weeping, his split lip blowing bloody bubbles. In the tussle, his red-and-blue striped shirt had ripped, the fishbelly skin of his chest showing through a fist-size hole. He didn't resist as Kaz let go of his wrists, took hold of the tear in his shirt with both hands, and ripped it apart. The collar wouldn't give, and Kaz tugged it off over Soupy's ears in three hard jerks, then stood and twirled the shreds over his head like a lasso before flinging it down on Soupy and walking away. What astonished Evers, besides the inner wildness Kaz had tapped and the style with which he'd destroyed his opponent, was how fast it all happened. In total, it had taken maybe two minutes. The teachers still hadn't even made it outside.

When the kid disappeared a week later, Evers and his pals thought he must have run away. Soupy's mother thought differently. He liked to go on wildlife walks, she said. He was a dreamy boy, he might have gotten lost. There was a massive search of the nearby woods, including baying teams of bloodhounds brought from Boston. As Boy Scouts, Evers and his friends were in on it. They heard the commotion at the dam end of Marsden's Pond and came running. Later, when they saw the eyeless thing that rose dripping from the

spillway, they would all wish they hadn't.

And now, thanks to God only knew what agency, here was Lester Embree at Tropicana Field, standing with the other fans watching the play at the plate. His fingers were mostly gone, but he still seemed to have his thumbs. His eyes and nose, too. Well, most of his nose. Lester was looking through the television screen at Dean Evers, just like Miss Nancy looking through her magic mirror on the old *Romper Room* show. "Romper, stomper, bomper, boo," Miss Nancy liked to chant in the way-back-when. "My magic mirror can see you."

Lester's pointing finger-stub. Lester's moving mouth. Saying what? Evers only had to watch it twice to be sure: *You murdered me.*

"Not true!" he yelled at the boy in the red-and-blue striped shirt. "Not true! *You fell in Marsden's! You fell in the pond! You fell in the pond and it was your own goddamned fault!*"

He turned off the TV and went to bed. He lay there awhile thrumming like a wire, then got up and took two Ambiens, washing them down with a healthy knock of scotch. The pill-and-booze combo killed the thrumming, at least, but he still lay wakeful, staring into the dark with eyes that felt as large and smooth as brass doorknobs. At three he turned the clock-radio around to face the wall. At five, as the first traces of dawn backlit the drapes, a comforting thought came to him. He wished he could share this comforting thought with Soupy Embree, but since he couldn't, he did the next best thing and spoke it aloud.

"If it were possible to go back in a time machine and change the stupid things some of us did in grammar school and junior high, Soups old buddy, that gadget would be booked up right into the twenty-third century."

Exactamundo. You couldn't blame kids. Grown-ups knew better, but kids were stupid by nature. Sometimes malevolent by nature too. He seemed to remember something about a girl in New Zealand who'd bludgeoned her best friend's mother to death with a brick. She'd hit the poor woman fifty times or more with that old brick, and when the girl was found guilty she went to jail for... what? Seven years? Five? Less? When she got out, she went to England and became an airline stewardess. Later she became a very popular mystery novelist. Who'd told him that story? Ellie, of course. El had been a great reader of mysteries, always trying—and often succeeding—in guessing whodunit.

"Soupy," he told his lightening bedroom, "you can't blame me. I plead diminished capacity." That actually made him smile.

As if it had just been waiting for this conclusion, another comforting thought arose. *I don't need to watch the game tonight. Nothing's forcing me to.*

That was finally enough to send him off. He woke shortly after noon, the first time he'd slept so late since college. In the kitchen he briefly considered the oatmeal, then fried himself three eggs in butter. He would have tossed in some bacon, if he'd had any. He did the next-best thing, adding it to the grocery list stuck to the fridge with a cucumber magnet.

"No game tonight for me," he told the empty condo. "Ah b'leeve Ah maht..."

He heard what his voice was doing and stopped, bewildered. It came to him that he might not be suffering from dementia or early-onset Alzheimer's; he might be having your ordinary everyday garden-variety nervous breakdown. That seemed a perfectly reasonable explanation for recent events, but knowledge was power. If you saw what was happening, you could stop it, right?

"I believe I might go out to a movie," he said in his own voice. Quietly. Reasonably. "That's all I meant to say."

In the end, he decided against a film. Although there were twenty screens in the immediate area, he could find nothing he wanted to watch on a single one of them. He went to the Publix instead, where he picked up a basketful of goodies (including a pound of the good thick-sliced pepper bacon Ellie loved). He started for the ten-items-or-less checkout lane, saw the girl at the register was wearing a Rays shirt with Matt Joyce's number 20 on the back, and diverted to one of the other lanes instead. That took longer, but he told himself he didn't mind. He also told himself he wasn't thinking about how someone would be singing the national anthem at the Trop right now. He'd picked up the new Harlan Coben in paperback, a little literary bacon to go with the literal variety. He'd read it tonight. Baseball couldn't match up to Coben's patented terror-in-the-burbs, not even when it was Jon Lester matched up against Matt Moore. How had he ever become interested in such a slow, boring sport to begin with?

He put away his groceries and settled onto the sofa. The Coben was terrific, and he got into it right away. Evers was so immersed that he didn't realize he'd picked up the TV remote, but when he got to the end of chapter six and decided to break for a small piece of Pepperidge Farm lemon cake, the gadget was right there in his hand.

Won't hurt to check the score, he thought. *Just a quick peek, and off it goes.*

The Rays were up one to nothing in the eighth, and Dewayne Staats was so excited he was burbling. "Don't want to talk about what's going on with Matt Moore tonight, folks—I'm old-school—but let's just say that the bases have been devoid of Crimson Hose."

No-hitter, Evers thought. *Moore's pitching a damn no-hitter and I've been missing it.*

Close-up on Moore. He was sweating, even in the Trop's constant 72 degrees. He went into his motion, the picture changed to the home plate shot, and there in the third row was Dean Evers's dead wife, wearing the same tennis whites she'd had on the day of her first stroke. He would have recognized that blue piping anywhere.

Ellie was deeply tanned, as she always was by this time of summer, and as was the case more often than not at the ballpark, she was ignoring the game entirely, poking at her iPhone instead. For an unfocused moment, Evers wondered who she was texting—someone here, or someone in the afterlife?—when, in his pocket, his cell phone buzzed.

She raised the phone to her ear and gave him a little wave.

Pick up, she mouthed, and pointed to her phone.

Evers shook his head no slowly.

His phone vibrated again, like a mild shock applied to his thigh.

"No," he said to the TV, and thought, logically: *She can just leave a message.*

Ellie shook her phone at him.

"This is wrong," he said. Because Ellie wasn't like Soupy Embree or Lennie Wheeler or Young Dr. Young. She loved him—of that Evers was sure—and he loved her. Forty-six years meant something, especially nowadays.

He searched her face. She seemed to be smiling, and while he didn't have a speech prepared, he guessed he did want to tell her how much he missed her, and what his days were like, and how he wished he was closer to Pat and Sue and the grandkids, because, really, there was no one else he could talk to.

He dug the phone from his pocket. Though he'd deactivated her account months ago, the number that came up was hers.

On TV, Moore was pacing behind the mound, juggling the rosin bag on the back of his pitching hand.

And then there she was, right behind David Ortiz, holding up her phone.

He pressed TALK.

"Hello?" he said.

"Finally," she said. "Why didn't you pick up?"

"I don't know. It's kind of weird, don't you think?"

"What's weird?"

"I don't know. You not being here and all."

"Dead, you mean. Me being dead."

"That."

"So you don't want to talk to me because I'm dead."

"No," he said. "I always want to talk to you." He smiled—at least, he thought he was smiling. He'd have to check the mirror to be sure,

because his face felt frozen. "You're wanted, sweetheart, dead or alive."

"You're such a liar. That's one thing I always hated about you. And fucking Martha, of course. I wasn't a big fan of that either."

What could he say to that? Nothing. So he sat silent.

"Did you think I didn't know?" she said. "That's another thing I hated about you, thinking I didn't know what was going on. It was so obvious. A couple of times you came home still stinking of her perfume. Juicy Couture. Not the most subtle of scents. But then, you were never the most subtle guy, Dean."

"I miss you, El."

"Okay, yes, I miss you too. That's not the point."

"I love you."

"Stop trying to press my buttons, all right? I need to do this. I didn't say anything before because I needed to keep everything together and make everything work. That's who I am. Or was, anyway. And I did. But you hurt me. You *cut* me."

"I'm sorr—"

"Please, Dean. I only have a couple minutes left, so for once in your life shut up and listen. You hurt me, and it wasn't just with Martha. And although I'm pretty sure Martha was the only one you slept with—"

That stung. "Of course she wa—"

"—don't expect any brownie points for that. You didn't have time to cheat on me with anyone outside the company because you were always there. Even when you were here you were there. I understood that, and maybe that was my fault for not sticking up for myself, but the one it really wasn't fair to was Patrick. You wonder why you never see him, it's because you were never there for him. You were always off in Denver or Seattle at some sales meeting or something. Selfishness is learned behavior, you know."

This criticism Evers had heard many times before, in many forms, and his attention waned. Moore had gone 3–2 on Papi. *Devoid*, Staats had said. Was Matt Moore really throwing a perfect game?

"You were always too worried about what you were doing, and not enough about the rest of us. You thought bringing home the bacon was enough."

I did, he almost told her. *I did bring home the bacon. Just tonight.*

"Dean? Are you hearing me? Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Yes," Evers said, just as the pitch from Moore caught the outside corner and the ump rang up Ortiz. "*Yes!*"

"I know that yes! God damn you, are you watching the stupid game?"

“Of course I’m watching the game.” Though now it was a truck commercial. A grinning man—one who undoubtedly knew how to get things done—was driving through mud at a suicidal speed.

“I don’t know why I called. You’re hopeless.”

“I’m not,” Evers said. “I miss you.”

“Jesus, why do I even bother? Forget it. Good-bye.”

“Don’t!” he said.

“I tried to be nice—that’s the story of my life. I tried to be nice and look where it got me. People like you *eat* nice. Good-bye, Dean.”

“I love you,” he repeated, but she was gone, and when the game came back on, the woman with the sparkly top was in Ellie’s seat. The woman with the sparkly top was a Tropicana Field regular. Sometimes the top was blue and sometimes it was green, but it was always sparkly. Probably so the folks at home could pick her out. As if she’d caught the thought, she waved. Evers waved back. “Yeah, bitch, I see you. You’re on TV, bitch, good fucking job.”

He got up and poured himself a scotch.

In the ninth Ellsbury snuck a seeing-eye single through the right side, and the crowd rose and applauded Moore for his effort. Evers turned the game off and sat before the dark screen, mulling what Ellie had said.

Unlike Soupy Embree’s accusation, Ellie’s was true. *Mostly true*, he amended, then changed it to *at least partly true*. She knew him better than anyone in the world—this world or any other—but she’d never been willing to give him the credit he deserved. He was, after all, the one who’d put groceries in the refrigerator all those years, some pretty high-grade bacon. He was also the one who’d *paid* for the refrigerator—a top-of-the-line Sub-Zero, thank you very much. He’d paid for her Audi. And her tennis club dues. And her massage therapist. And all the stuff she bought from the catalogs. And hey, let’s not forget Patrick’s college tuition! Evers had had to put together a jackleg combination of scholarships, loan packages, and shit summer jobs to get through school, but Patrick had gotten a full boat from his old man. The old man he was too busy to call these days.

She comes back from the dead, and why? To complain. And to do it on the goddamn iPhone I paid for.

He thought of an old saying and wished he’d quoted it to Ellie while he still had the chance: “Money can’t buy happiness, but it allows one to endure unhappiness in relative comfort.”

That might have shut her up.

The more he considered their life together—and there was nothing like talking to your dead spouse while you looked at her in a club seat to make you consider such things—the more he thought that while he hadn’t been perfect, he’d still been all right. He did love her

and Patrick, and had always tried to be kind to them. He'd worked hard to give them everything he never had, thinking he was doing the right thing. If it wasn't enough, there was nothing he could do about it now. As for the thing with Martha... some kinds of fucking were meaningless. Men understood that—Kaz certainly would have understood it—but women did not.

In bed, dropping into a blissful oblivion that was three parts Ambien and two parts scotch, it came to him that Ellie's rant was strangely freeing. Who else could they (whoever *they* were) send to bedevil him? Who could make him feel any worse? His mother? His father? He'd loved them, but not as he'd loved Ellie. Miss Pritchett? His uncle Elmer who used to tickle him till he wet his pants?

Snuggling deeper into the covers, Evers actually snickered at that. No, the worst had happened. And although there would be another great match-up tomorrow night at the Trop—Josh Beckett squaring off against James Shields—he didn't have to watch. His last thought was that from now on, he'd have more time to read. Lee Child, maybe. He'd been meaning to get to those Lee Child books.

But first he had the Harlan Coben to finish. He spent the afternoon lost in the green, pitiless suburbs. As the sun went down on another St. Petersburg Sunday, he was into the last fifty pages or so, and racing along. That was when his phone buzzed. He picked it up gingerly—the way a man might pick up a loaded mousetrap—and looked at the readout. What he saw there was a relief. The call was from Kaz, and unless his old pal had suffered a fatal heart attack (not entirely out of the question; he was a good thirty pounds overweight), he was calling from Punta Gorda rather than the afterlife.

Still, Evers was cautious; given recent events, he had every reason to be. "Kaz, is that you?"

"Who the hell else would it be?" Kaz boomed. Evers winced and held the phone away from his ear. "Barack fucking Obama?"

Evers laughed feebly. "No, I just—"

"Fuckin' Dino Martino! You suck, buddy! Front-row seats, and you didn't even call me?"

From far away, Evers heard himself say: "I only had one ticket." He looked at his watch. Twenty past eight. It should have been the second inning by now--unless the Rays and Red Sox were the 8:00 Sunday-night game on ESPN.

He reached for the remote.

Kaz, meanwhile, was laughing. The way he'd laughed that day in the schoolyard. It had been higher-pitched then, but otherwise it was just the same. *He* was just the same. It was a depressing thought. "Yeah, yeah, I'm just yankin' your ballsack. How's the view from there?"

“Great,” Evers said, pushing the power button on the remote. Fox 13 was showing some old movie with Bruce Willis blowing things up. He punched 29 and ESPN came on. Shields was dealing to Dustin Pedroia, second in the Sox lineup. The game had just started.

I’m doomed to baseball, Evers thought.

“Dino? Earth to Dino Martino! You still there?”

“I’m here,” he said, and turned up the volume. Pedroia flailed and missed. The crowd roared; those irritating cowbells the Rays fans favored clanged with maniacal fervor. “Pedie just struck out.”

“No shit. I ain’t blind, Stevie Wonder. The Rays Rooters are pumped up, huh?”

“Totally pumped,” Evers said hollowly. “Great night for a ball game.”

Now Adrian Gonzalez was stepping in. And there, sitting in the first row right behind the screen, doing a fair impersonation of a craggy old snowbird playing out his golden years in the Sunshine State, was Dean Patrick Evers.

He was wearing a ridiculous foam finger, and although he couldn’t read it, not even in HD, he knew what it said: RAYS ARE #1. Evers at home stared at Evers behind home with the phone against his ear. Evers at the park stared back, holding the selfsame phone in the hand that wasn’t wearing the foam finger. With a sense of outrage that not even his stunned amazement could completely smother, he saw that Ballpark Evers was wearing a Rays jersey. *Never*, he thought. *Those are traitor colors.*

“There you are!” Kaz shouted exultantly. “Shake me a wave, buddy!”

Evers at the ballpark raised the foam finger and waved it solemnly, like an oversize windshield wiper. Evers at home, on autopilot, did the same with his free hand.

“Love the shirt, Dino,” Kaz said. “Seeing you in Rays colors is like seeing Doris Day topless.” He snickered.

“I had to wear it,” Evers said. “The guy who gave me the ticket insisted. Listen, I’ve gotta go. Want to grab a beer and a d—ohmygod, there it goes!”

Gonzo had launched a long drive, high and deep.

“Drink one for me!” Kaz shouted.

On Evers’s expensive TV, Gonzalez was lumbering around the bases. As he watched, Evers suddenly understood what he had to do. There was only one way to put an end to this cosmic joke. On a Sunday night, downtown St. Pete would be deserted. If he took a taxi, he could be at the Trop by the end of the second inning. Maybe even sooner.

“Kaz?”

“Yeah, buddy?”

“We should either have been nicer to Lester Embree, or left him alone.”

He pushed END before Kaz could reply. He turned off the TV. Then he went into his bedroom, rooted through the folded shirts in his bureau, and found his beloved Curt Schilling jersey, the one with the bloody sock on the front and WHY NOT US? on the back. Schilling had been The Man, afraid of nothing. When the Evers in the Rays shirt saw him in this one, he'd fade away like the bad dream he was and all of this would end.

Evers yanked the shirt on and called a cab. There was one nearby that had just dropped off a fare, and the streets were as deserted as Evers had expected. The cabbie had the game on the radio. The Sox were still batting in the top half of the second when he pulled up to the main gate.

“You'll have to settle for nosebleeds,” the cabbie said. “Sox–Rays, that's a hot ticket.”

“I've got one right behind home plate,” Evers said. “Stop somewhere they've got the game on, you might see me. Look for the shirt with the bloody sock on it.”

“I heard that fuckin' hoser's video game business went broke,” the cabbie said as Evers handed him a ten. He looked, saw Evers still sitting in the backseat with the door open, and reluctantly made change. From it, Evers handed him a single crumpled simoleon.

“Guy with a front-row seat should be able to do better'n that for a tip,” the cabbie grumbled.

“Guy with half a brain in his head should keep his mouth shut about the Big Schill,” Evers said. “If he wants a better tip, that is.” He slipped out, slammed the door and headed for the entrance.

“*Fuck you, Boston!*” the cabbie shouted.

Without turning around, Evers hoisted a middle finger—real, not foam.

The concourse with its palm trees lit like Christmas in Hawaii was all but empty, the sound of the crowd inside the stadium a hollow surf-boom. It was a sellout, the LED signs above the shuttered ticket windows bragged. There was only one window still open, all the way down at the end, the WILL CALL.

Yes, Evers thought, because they *will* call, won't they? He headed for it like a man on rails.

“Help you, sir?” the pretty ticket agent asked, and was that Juicy Couture she was wearing? Surely not. He remembered Martha saying, *It's my slut perfume. I only wear it for you.* She'd been willing to do things Ellie wouldn't dream of, things he remembered at all the wrong times.

"Help you, sir?"

"Sorry," Evers said. "Had a little senior moment there."

She smiled dutifully.

"Do you happen to have a ticket for Evers? Dean Evers?"

There was no hesitation, no thumbing through a whole box of envelopes, because there was only one left. It had his name on it. She slid it through the gap in the glass. "Enjoy the game."

"We'll see," Evers said.

He made for Gate A, opening the envelope and taking out the ticket. A piece of paper was clipped to it, just four words below the Rays logo: **COMPLIMENTS OF THE MANAGEMENT**. He strode briskly up the ramp and handed the ticket to a crusty usher who was standing there and watching as Elliot Johnson dug in against Josh Beckett. At the very least, the geezer was a good half century older than his employers. Like so many of his kind, he was in no hurry. It was one reason Evers no longer drove.

"Nice seat," the usher said, raising his eyebrows. "Just about the best in the house. And you show up late." He gave a disapproving head shake.

"I would have been here sooner," Evers said, "but my wife died."

The usher froze in the act of turning away, Evers's ticket in hand.

"Gotcha," Evers said, smiling and pointing a playful finger-gun. "That one never fails."

The usher didn't look amused. "Follow me, sir."

Down and down the steep steps they went. The usher was in worse shape than Evers, all wattle and liver spots, and by the time they reached the front row, Johnson was headed back to the dugout, a strikeout victim. Evers's seat was the only empty one—or not quite empty. Leaning against the back was a large blue foam finger that blasphemed: RAYS ARE #1.

My seat, Evers thought, and as he picked the offending finger up and sat down he saw, with only the slightest surprise, that he was no longer wearing his treasured Schilling jersey. Somewhere between the cab and this ridiculous, padded Captain Kirk perch, it had been replaced by a turquoise Rays shirt. And although he couldn't see the back, he knew what it said: MATT YOUNG.

"Young Matt Young," he said, a crack that his neighbors—neither of whom he recognized—pointedly ignored. He craned around, searching the section for Ellie and Soupy Embree and Lennie Wheeler, but it was just a mix of anonymous Rays and Sox fans. He didn't even see the sparkly-top lady.

Between pitches, as he was twisted around trying to see behind him, the guy on his right tapped Evers's arm and pointed to the JumboTron just in time for him to catch a grotesquely magnified

version of himself turning around.

"You missed yourself," the guy said.

"That's all right," Evers said. "I've been on TV enough lately."

Before Beckett could decide between his fastball and his slider, Evers's phone buzzed in his pocket.

Can't even watch the game in peace.

"Yello," he said.

"Who'm I talkin' to?" The voice of Chuckie Kazmierski was high and truculent, his I'm-ready-to-fight voice. Evers knew it well, had heard it often over the long arc of years stretching between Fairlawn Grammar and this seat at Tropicana Field, where the light was always dingy and the stars were never seen. "That you, Dino?"

"Who else? Bruce Willis?" Beckett missed low and away. The crowd rang their idiotic cowbells.

"Dino Martino, right?"

Jesus, Evers thought, next he'll be saying who's on first and I'll be saying what's on second.

"Yes, Kaz, the artist formerly known as Dean Patrick Evers. We ate paste together in the second grade, remember? Probably too much."

"It is you!" Kaz shouted, making Evers jerk the phone away from his ear. "I *told* that cop he was full of shit! Detective Kelly, my ass."

"What in hell are you talking about?"

"Some ass-knot pretending to be a cop's what I'm talkin' about. I knew it couldn't be real, he sounded too fuckin' official."

"Huh," Evers said. "An official official, imagine that."

"Guy tells me you're dead, so I go, if he's dead, how come I just talked to him on the phone? And the cop—the *so-called* cop—he goes, I think you're mistaken, sir. You must have talked to someone else. And I go, how come I just now saw him on TV at the Rays game? And this so-called cop goes, either you saw someone who looked like him or someone who looks like him is dead in his apartment. You believe this shit?"

Beckett bounced one off the plate. He was all over the place. The crowd was loving it. "If it wasn't a prank, I guess someone made a big mistake."

"Ya *think*?" Kaz gave his trademark laugh, low and raspy. "Especially since I'm talkin' to you right fuckin' now."

"You called to make sure I was still alive, huh?"

"Yeah." Now that he was settling down, Kaz seemed puzzled by this.

"Tell me something—if I'd turned out to be dead after all, would you have left a voice mail?"

"What? Jesus, I don't know." Kaz seemed more puzzled than ever,

but that was nothing new. He'd always been puzzled. By events, by other people, probably by his own beating heart. Evers supposed that was part of why he'd so often been angry. Even when he wasn't angry, he was *ready* to be angry.

I'm speaking of him in the past tense, Evers realized.

"The guy I talked to said they found you at your place. Said you'd been dead for a while too."

The guy next to Evers nudged him again. "Lookin' good, buddy," he said.

On the JumboTron, shocking in its homely familiarity, was Evers's darkened bedroom. In the middle of the bed he'd shared with Ellie, the pillowtop king that was now too big for him, Evers lay still and pale, his eyes half-lidded, his lips purplish, his mouth a stiff rictus. Foam had dried like old spiderwebs on his chin.

When Evers turned to his seatmate, wanting to confirm what he was seeing, the seat beside him—the row, the section, the whole Tropicana Dome—was empty. And yet the players kept playing.

"They said you killed yourself."

"I didn't kill myself," Evers replied, and thought: *That damn expired Ambien. And maybe putting it with the scotch wasn't such a great idea. How long has it been? Since Friday night?*

"I know, it didn't sound like you."

"So, are you watching the game?"

"I turned it off. Fuckin' cop—that fuckin' ass-knot—upset me."

"Turn it on again," Evers said.

"Okay," Kaz said. "Lemme grab the remote."

"You know, we should have been nicer to Lester Embree."

"Water over the dam, old buddy. Or under the bridge. Or whatever the fuck it is."

"Maybe not. From now on, don't be so angry. Try to be nicer to people. Try to be nicer to everyone. Do that for me, will you, Kaz?"

"What the Christ is wrong with you? You sound like a fuckin' Hallmark card on Mother's Day."

"I suppose I do," Evers said. He found this a very sad idea, somehow. On the mound, Beckett was peering in for the sign.

"Hey, Dino! There you are! You sure don't *look* dead." Kaz gave out his old rusty cackle.

"I don't feel it."

"I was scared there for a minute," Kaz said. "Fuckin' crank yanker. Wonder how he got my number."

"Dunno," Evers said, surveying the empty park. Though of course he knew. After Ellie died, of the nine million people in Tampa-St. Pete, Kaz was the only person he could put down as an emergency contact. And that idea was sadder still.

"All right, buddy, I'll let you get back to the game. Maybe golf next week if it doesn't rain."

"We'll see," Evers said. "Stay cool, Kazzie, and—"

Kaz joined him then, and they chanted the last line together, as they had many, many times before: "*Don't let the bastards get you down!*"

That was it, it was over. He sensed things moving again, a flurry behind him, at the periphery of his vision. He looked around, phone in hand, and saw the spotted usher creakily leading Uncle Elmer and Aunt June down the stairs, and several girls he'd dated in high school, including the one who'd been sort of semiconscious—or maybe *unconscious* would be closer to the truth—when he'd had her. Behind them came Miss Pritchett with her hair down for once, and Mrs. Carlisle from the drugstore, and the Jansens, the elderly neighbors whose deposit bottles he'd stolen off their back porch. From the other side, as if it were a company outing, a second, equally ancient usher was filling in the rows at the top of the section with former Speedy employees, a number of them in their blue uniforms. He recognized Don Blanton, who'd been questioned during a child pornography investigation in the mid-nineties and had hung himself in his Malden garage. Evers remembered how shocked he'd been, both by the idea of someone he knew possibly being involved in kiddie porn and by Don's final action. He'd always liked the man, and hadn't wanted to let him go, but with that kind of accusation hanging over his head, what else could he do? The reputation of a company's employees was part of its bottom line.

He still had some battery left. What the hell, he thought. It was a big game. They were probably watching on the Cape.

"Hey, Dad," Pat answered.

"You watching the game?"

"The kids are. The grown-ups are playing cards."

Next to the first usher stood Lennie Wheeler's daughter, still in her black crepe and veil. She pointed like a dark spectre at Evers. She'd lost all her baby fat, and Evers wondered if that had happened before she died, or after.

"Go look at the game, son."

"Hang on," Pat said, followed by the screek of a chair. "Okay, I'm watching."

"Right behind home, in the front row."

"What am I looking at?"

Evers stood up behind the netting and waved his blue foam finger. "Do you see me?"

"No, where are you?"

Young Dr. Young hobbled down the steep stairs on his bad leg,

using the seat backs to steady himself. On his smock, like a medal, was a coffee-colored splotch of dried blood.

“Do you see me now?” Evers took the phone from his ear and waved both arms over his head as if he was flagging a train. The grotesque finger nodded back and forth.

“No.”

So, no.

Which was fine. Which was actually better.

“Be good, Patty,” Evers said. “I love you.”

He hit END as, all around the park, the sections were filling in. He couldn't see who'd come to spend eternity with him in peanut heaven or the far reaches of the outfield, but the premium seats were going fast. Here came the ushers with the shambling, rag-clad remnants of Soupy Embree, and then his mother, haggard after a double shift, and Lennie Wheeler in his pinstripe funeral suit and Grandfather Lincoln with his cane and Martha and Ellie and his mother and father and all the people he'd ever wronged in his life. As they filed into his row from both sides, he stuck his phone in his pocket and took his seat again, pulling off the foam finger as he did. He propped it on the now unoccupied seat to his left. Saving it for Kaz. Because he was sure Kaz would be joining them at some point, after seeing him on TV, and calling him. If Evers had learned anything about how this worked, it was that the two of them weren't done talking just yet.

A cheer erupted, and the rattle of cowbells. The Rays were still hitting. Down the right field line, though it was far too early, some loudmouth was exhorting the crowd to start the wave. As always when distracted from the action, Evers checked the scoreboard to catch up. It was only the third and Beckett had already thrown sixty pitches. The way things were looking, it was going to be a long game.



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